

## Chapter 4 - First Impressions

'Good-day, Messer Domenico,' said Nello to the foremost of the two visitors who entered the shop, while he nodded silently to the other. 'You come as opportunely as cheese on macaroni. Ah! you are in haste - wish to be shaved without delay - ecco! And this is a morning when every one has grave matter on his mind. Florence orphaned - the very pivot of Italy snatched away - heaven itself at a loss what to do next. Oime! Well, well; the sun is nevertheless travelling on towards dinner-time again; and, as I was saying, you come like cheese ready grated. For this young stranger was wishing for an honourable trader who would advance him a sum on a certain ring of value, and if I had counted every goldsmith and money-lender in Florence on my fingers, I couldn't have found a better name than Menico Cennini. Besides, he hath other ware in which you deal - Greek learning, and young eyes - a double implement which you printers are always in need of.'

The grave elderly man, son of that Bernardo Cennini, who, twenty years before, having heard of the new process of printing carried on by Germans, had cast his own types in Florence, remained necessarily in lathered silence and passivity while Nello showered this talk in his ears, but turned a slow sideway gaze on the stranger.

'This fine young man has unlimited Greek, Latin, or Italian at your service,' continued Nello, fond of interpreting by very ample paraphrase. 'He is as great a wonder of juvenile learning as Francesco Filelfo or our own incomparable Poliziano. A second Guarino,' too, for he has had the misfortune to be ship-wrecked, and has doubtless lost a store of precious manuscripts that might have contributed some correctness even to your correct editions, Domenico. Fortunately, he has rescued a few gems of rare value. His name is - you said your name, Messer, was - ?'

'Tito Melema,' said the stranger, slipping the ring from his finger, and presenting it to Cennini, whom Nello, not less rapid with his razor than with his tongue, had now released from the shaving-cloth.

Meanwhile the man who had entered the shop in company with the goldsmith - a tall figure, about fifty, with a short trimmed beard, wearing an old felt hat and a threadbare mantle - had kept his eye fixed on the Greek, and now said abruptly -

'Young man, I am painting a picture of Sinon deceiving old Priam, and I should be glad of your face for my Sinon, if you'd give me a sitting.'

Tito Melema started and looked round with a pale astonishment in his face as if at a sudden accusation; but Nello left him no time to feel at a loss for an answer: 'Piero,' said the barber, 'thou art the most

extraordinary compound of humours and fancies ever packed into a human skin. What trick wilt thou play with the fine visage of this young scholar to make it suit thy traitor? Ask him rather to turn his eyes upward, and thou mayst make a Saint Sebastian of him that will draw troops of devout women; or, if thou art in a classical vein, put myrtle about his curls and make him a young Bacchus, or say rather a Phoebus Apollo, for his face is as warm and bright as a summer morning; it made me his friend in the space of a 'credo.'

'Ay, Nello,' said the painter, speaking with abrupt pauses; 'and if thy tongue can leave off its everlasting chirping long enough for thy understanding to consider the matter, thou mayst see that thou hast just shown the reason why the face of Messere will suit my traitor. A perfect traitor should have a face which vice can write no marks on - lips that will lie with a dimpled smile - eyes of such agate-like brightness and depth that no infamy can dull them - cheeks that will rise from a murder and not look haggard. I say not this young man is a traitor: I mean, he has a face that would make him the more perfect traitor if he had the heart of one, which is saying neither more nor less than that he has a beautiful face, informed with rich young blood, that will be nourished enough by food, and keep its colour without much help of virtue. He may have the heart of a hero along with it; I aver nothing to the contrary. Ask Domenico there if the lapidaries can always tell a gem by the sight alone. And now I'm going to put the tow in my ears, for thy chatter and the bells together are more than I can endure: so say no more to me, but trim my beard.'

With these last words Piero (called 'di Cosimo,' from his master, Cosimo Rosselli) drew out two bits of tow, stuffed them in his ears, and placed himself in the chair before Nello, who shrugged his shoulders and cast a grimacing look of intelligence at the Greek, as much as to say, 'A whimsical fellow, you perceive! Everybody holds his speeches as mere jokes.'

Tito, who had stood transfixed, with his long dark eyes resting on the unknown man who had addressed him so equivocally, seemed recalled to his self-command by Piero's change of position, and apparently satisfied with his explanation, was again giving his attention to Cennini, who presently said -

'This is a curious and valuable ring, young man. This intaglio of the fish with the crested serpent above it, in the black stratum of the onyx, or rather nicolo, is well shown by the surrounding blue of the upper stratum. The ring has, doubtless, a history?' added Cennini, looking up keenly at the young stranger.

'Yes, indeed,' said Tito, meeting the scrutiny very frankly. 'The ring was found in Sicily, and I have understood from those who busy

themselves with gems and sigils, that both the stone and intaglio are of virtue to make the wearer fortunate, especially at sea, and also to restore to him whatever he may have lost. But,' he continued, smiling, 'though I have worn it constantly since I quitted Greece, it has not made me altogether fortunate at sea, you perceive, unless I am to count escape from drowning as a sufficient proof of its virtue. It remains to be seen whether my lost chests will come to light; but to lose no chance of such a result, Messer, I will pray you only to hold the ring for a short space as pledge for a small sum far beneath its value, and I will redeem it as soon as I can dispose of certain other gems which are secured within my doublet, or indeed as soon as I can earn something by any scholarly employment, if I may be so fortunate as to meet with such.'

'That may be seen, young man, if you will come with me,' said Cennini. 'My brother Pietro, who is a better judge of scholarship than I, will perhaps be able to supply you with a task that may test your capabilities. Meanwhile, take back your ring until I can hand you the necessary florins, and, if it please you, come along with me.'

'Yes, yes,' said Nello, 'go with Messer Domenico, you cannot go in better company; he was born under the constellation that gives a man skill, riches, and integrity, whatever that constellation may be, which is of the less consequence because babies can't choose their own horoscopes, and, indeed, if they could, there might be an inconvenient rush of babies at particular epochs. Besides, our Phoenix, the incomparable Pico, has shown that your horoscopes are all a nonsensical dream - which is the less troublesome opinion. Addio! bel giovane! don't forget to come back to me.'

'No fear of that,' said Tito, beckoning a farewell, as he turned round his bright face at the door. 'You are to do me a great service: - that is the most positive security for your seeing me again.'

'Say what thou wilt, Piero,' said Nello, as the young stranger disappeared, 'I shall never look at such an outside as that without taking it as a sign of a lovable nature. Why, thou wilt say next that Lionardo, whom thou art always raving about, ought to have made his Judas as beautiful as St John! But thou art as deaf as the top of Mount Morello with that accursed tow in thy ears. Well, well: I'll get a little more of this young man's history from him before I take him to Bardo Bardi.'